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Engaged Academics? Dilemmas for early career academics[1]

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Introduction

Despite the commitment to engagement with the broader community that is central to understandings of the role of academics within the university tradition, there are now significant barriers to the performance of this role. Significant changes in the management, funding and priorities of universities (prompted by government policy) have created conditions where community engagement comes a distant third in the lives of contemporary academics behind research and teaching. Some have suggested that community engagement is not just a low priority activity in modern academia, but one that is consciously discouraged through waning academic freedoms, more tenuous employment circumstances, and restrictive codes of conduct conditions at several universities (Polya 2001/2002).

This paper argues that while there has been much discussion of the privileging of research over teaching, the value and commitment to community service remains at the margins of reality and debate in Australian universities.

Why Community Engagement?

The working life of the academic has been conceived as a group of interrelated, equally important, roles: the teacher, the researcher, and the public intellectual. The belief that "universities have a role in conserving and transmitting a public culture" (Maddox 2000: 327) is a long standing tradition in Australian universities. A strong academic is thought to be one that meaningfully engages all three of these critical purposes and domains in their work and continues to improve this engagement through self-reflection and personal development.

One of the reasons for an emphasis on the three facets of academic life and community engagement has been the acknowledgement that one of the important roles of the university is to be involved in, and contribute to, public debate. Community involvement is at the heart of the relevance of academic pursuits. Interaction and participation in the wider community is essential to facilitate the dispersal and discussion of research insights and to stimulate debate on important issues. Universities in Australia have long been considered an important contributor to public life and the public good (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2001), as well as a crucial site for knowledge and the development of intellectuals. These public roles assume engagement with the community as part of the wider identity and purpose of the university.

Recent reforms in Australian higher education however have shifted understandings of what the university is. The net impact of these reforms has been to re-make universities as corporations and to step away from the notion of them contributing to the public good and the community (Marginson 2003). Universities are now conceived as corporations providing a private good for individual consumers. New priorities, funding arrangements and governance structures within universities emphasise commercialisation and place significant drivers on academics to privilege applied, industry-relevant commercial research above non-commercial research, teaching and community engagement. Increasingly, notions of community engagement and relevance in universities are becoming conceived through the lens of commercialisation. Service has become something provided to students of higher

[1] This paper evolved from a dialogue Dr. James Whelan and I presented in the *Understanding Environmental Issues* seminar series at Griffith University in May 2004. I'd like to thank James for inspiring me to think more about these issues.

education, and on committees within universities, rather than something performed as a public good to the wider community.

Indeed, community engagement itself, and what is means, is being significantly re-made. Relevance has come to be defined by vocation and outcomes based teaching and learning. The relevance of academic learning and academia itself has been vocationalised – thus, community engagement has increasingly become thought of as a process of engaging students with the workplaces and industries they will work in. Community engagement is something academics help students do; the literature is dominated by examples of community engagement as "service learning" (for example see: McFadden et al 2002; Ross & Ardel 1999), or internships and industry placements to provide "learning for the workplace" (Langworthy & Turner 2003). For example, Griffith University's Academic Plan sets out five signature experiences to promote, including engaging community. It places value on: "community engagement as a *context for learning*" (O'Connor 2003: 2; emphasis added). These comments should not be seen to detract from the valuable experiences service learning provides students; however, the university's engagement with the wider community cannot be reduced simply to vocational placement opportunities for students during their education.

The other way in which community engagement has come to be thought of is as "relevant" research; academics show community engagement through applied, industry-based or commercially relevant research and partnerships. Research which has clear commercial applications, and industry-based research partnerships are increasingly encouraged by universities that have experienced declining direct funding for research, as well as an increase in competition for a much reduced external funding pool. Australian Research Council (ARC) funding attracts applications from only the top 10% of researchers in Australian universities, yet only has a 20% success rate (Polya 2001/2002). With such intense competition, it's not surprising that universities and researchers have turned to promoting projects with an external commercial or industry focus to access funds. Despite the decline in direct funding, government measures of university "success" still focus overwhelmingly on research output, thus, so must universities.

However, one area where academics may be able to significantly contribute to the public good is through linking service to their research. Unfortunately, research funding opportunities with *community based* partners are limited. ARC Linkage Grants do provide the possibility of collaboration with community partners, though many would be limited by the requirement to provide funds or resources that are then matched by the ARC (Webber 2002). This is especially unlikely in light of the preference given to those projects where community partners are shown to contribute a significant financial commitment, rather than just time, personnel or materials (Graeme Turner, personal communication, August 6 2004). University research budgets also make only small proportions of their total available for community partnership research, providing the bulk of their internal budgets for developing projects with medium-term prospects as industry-based, commercially-applicable, or ARC fundable research**.** Within the Griffith University budget for research to be undertaken in 2004, only 0.04% ($100 000) was quarantined for community partnership research, and the rest of the funding strongly oriented to developing or supporting ARC projects (personal communication, Mary Meadowcroft, Griffith University Office of Research, 15 October 2004).

Thus, the idea of research as a public good for the benefit of the community has been eroded with Australian universities instead moving towards research that has clear commercial applications and industry-based applications for particular clients (Polya 2001/2002). Increasingly, government funding formulas have privileged those outcomes that can be

easily quantified for measurement, and research is no different (DETYA 1999) and unquantifiable outputs have become at risk of marginalisation. Further underlining this, staff are promoted and given prestige on the basis of research output and funding attracted (Webber 2002). Significantly, several universities award "Researcher of the Year" solely on the basis of external funding procured[2]. Therefore, community engagement and service is also marginalised, not just by the emphasis on research in university reward systems, but also through the *type* of research that is encouraged, funded and ultimately privileged within academia.

Implications for Early Career Academics

The changes to the way universities and academics are conceived in the "new" university has clear implications for early career academics. The outcomes of the de-valuing of community engagement for academics has clear ramifications, as does the university's failure to recognise or reward those who do engage with the community in their research or as community service.

University signals of value can be determined through the recognition and reward systems in place for academic staff. Academics are frequently reminded of those activities and products that the university values through rewards (such as promotions and funding) and performance evaluations. Thus, "[t]he publication of a paper is a performance indicator, a notch on the belt, another centimetre on the curriculum vitae" (Stewart 1999: 28) and output becomes value. This then encourages an emphasis on the publication of research to meet departmental and university expectations regarding research outputs (Webber 2002) at the expense of other aspects of the academic role. In recent years, there has been recognition of this problem in regard to teaching (Doring 2002). Government policy, and university rhetoric have placed a renewed emphasis on teaching "quality", but not all universities have embraced promotion via teaching, or extensively fund teaching development or professional development programs. However, government policy does not provide significant funds on the basis of teaching, though quality assurance measures and "customer satisfaction" have become pervasive in universities. Though these processes, as Maddox points out, have in effect only "determined .. whether teachers were popular and whether subject materials were too hard" (2000: 328).

More fundamentally, these imbalances signal that universities value research above teaching or service, and without formal recognition mechanisms, that they don't value service at all. However, universities merely take their signals from the government funding formulas. Government funding emphasises research output, output of research students, and to some extent, teaching quantity (not quality). The wider ramification of these reward structures has been to lead to significant changes in the way the academic is conceived. In the course of research for this paper, a significant number of articles that investigated the role of academics, the challenges for early career academics, and the academic workload consistently conceived the three roles of academics as teaching, research and administrative: service failed to be included at all (for example see: Baker 1995; Adams & Rytmeister 2000). Overwhelmingly, the role of the academic has been re-made, and this transformation rejects the model of the public intellectual, or the engagement of universities with the broader community in promotion of the public good. This change has clear implications for early career researchers and the way they conceive their role, especially for those that are committed to community engagement.

[2] For instance, at Central Queensland University in Rockhampton.

While university reward structures, and government policy have de-valued the idea of the university as a public good, thus removing the role of community engagement to the margins of the academic life. However, the de-valuing of the community engagement has progressed further, to the point where it has been de-legitimised. Those academics that are community engaged are often accused of bias, or "activism", something that it seems has no place in the "new" university. Thus, the publicly engaged intellectual is constructed as lacking "objectivity" and integrity, and as without independence or scholarly values (Alcoff 2002), perhaps because governments and universities indicate that a public role is of no value. Indeed, as Alcoff further argues: "[t]o make passionate arguments is to abrogate the unspoken intellectual law of being at all times neutral and evenhanded" (2002: 526).

In February 2003 the California State University (Fresno) was widely criticised for organising a conference, *Revolutionary Environmentalism: A Dialogue Between Activists and Academics*. The involvement of environmental groups who favoured direct action and the consideration of these groups as legitimate, if only as subjects of research, was a concern for not only members of the community, but drew the attention of fellow academics as well (Fogg 2003). Interestingly, while academic collaborations, dialogues or partnerships with commercial interests remain beyond question, those with activists or community partners raise concerns from other academics; engaged academics' objectivity is questioned. Perhaps, the moral purposes of industry and business in the climate of the new university are unquestioned, given the corporatisation of the university, while "activism" seeks change. However, "maintaining the status quo is in itself a form of activism… "objectivity" in academia can too often mask support for the status quo" (Payne Adler 2002: 141).

Thus, in the current managerial climate of Australian universities, it seems that community service and the public good are among the latest casualties. The third role of the academic has been necessarily stunted, abandoned or even demonised by higher education workers attempting to balance the significant demands of high teaching loads, and the research outputs that the university reward systems and hierarchies make clear constitute value. Thus, "many believe that the best course for academics concerned with public service is simply to do our jobs well. Some, in fact, suggest that academics ought to *avoid* direct public service, both because we are ill-suited for it and because it undermines professional integrity" (Jenni 2001: 442). Early career academics soon learn the rules – "it is better to be published than to be brave" (Stewart 1999: 29).

Conclusion

Despite the tradition of community engagement as being a critical third role for academics in universities, the emphasis placed on this within current academia in Australia makes it almost invisible. Both government policies, and the policies of universities themselves marginalise the community engagement role to the edges of academic practice. As Whelan points out: "Although universities may not overtly discourage speaking out, the pressures to publish, teach and keep pace with administrivia inevitably mitigate against many academics' active engagement in civil society" (2003: 1).

Thus, community engagement and community relevance is now beyond the reach of many academics. This is especially true for early career academics that carry a larger teaching load than senior academics and struggle to find the time for even their research. With the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce, engagement is too much to expect of those who are employed casually, or on short term contracts. Unfortunately, this suggests that for early career academics, especially those without the security of tenure, community engagement remains a role for which there is no time, no funding and no recognition.

Most concerning is that engagement with the broader community, once valued as a critical role for universities, now fails to be valued by either universities or the government. One reason for this shift can be attributed to the fundamentally changed nature of what a university is. As two decades of "reforms" in Australian universities have remade higher education as a corporate enterprise for the largely vocational training of private customers, those attributes that characterised academia as a provider of service to the public good have been marginalised. However, without contribution and connection to the community, universities cease to be a public good – and as such, may cease to attract appropriate public funding as they slide closer and closer to privatisation.

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